JÜRGEN HABERMAS

A Berlin Republic: Writings on Germany

Translated by Steven Rendall

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A BERLIN REPUBLIC

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POLITY PRESS

First published in England 1998 by Polity Press in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
Published with the assistance of Inter Nationes, Bonn.

Editorial office:
Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Marketing and production:
Blackwell Publishers Ltd.
108 Cowley Road
Oxford OX4 1JF, UK

ISBN 0-7456-2044-2
ISBN 0-7456-2045-0 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library.
This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Contents

Introduction by Peter Uwe Hohendahl

THE SERIES OF ESSAYS, articles, and interviews collected in this volume reflects a side of Jürgen Habermas's work that is less known in the United States than his major theoretical texts, beginning with *Knowledge and Human Interest* (1971) and leading up to *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1984). They demonstrate the author's ongoing involvement in the German and European public sphere. More specifically, they are the interventions of a passionate public intellectual, who has always felt that his academic appointment at the University of Frankfurt could not be the only platform from which to respond to the questions of the day. The recent discovery of Habermas's early work in the English-speaking world, in particular the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989 (the first German edition appeared in 1962), provides perhaps a more suitable frame for an appreciation of the rhetoric of these essays than his theoretically more abstract later writings, as much as they exhibit, although in different forms, their author's strong commitment to the idea of political praxis.[1] Habermas's concept of the public sphere, a space where private persons come together to develop a critical discourse that aims at a rational consensus in matters of culture and politics, still guides the thrust of Habermas's essays from the early 1990s. Al-

1. For a general introduction see Thomas McCarthy, *The Critical Theory of Jürgen Habermas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978); see also *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985).

though he moved away from the specific historical arguments of *Structural Transformation* during the 1970s and later completely abandoned the theoretical framework of his first major book, Habermas holds on to the conception of the public sphere as a realm that is not occupied by symbolic media; a realm, in other words, where citizens through the form of rational discussion find the resources to resist the pressure and the intrusion of the state and the economy. In the terminology of Habermas's later work, the public sphere is an essential part of the lifeworld in which people interact and make sense of their lives.

In the new introduction to the 1990 German edition of *Structural Transformation* (available in English as 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere') Habermas insists again on the need for a vibrant and open public sphere but also on the need for a new and different theoretical grounding. 'I suggested, therefore, that the normative foundations of the critical theory of society be laid at a deeper level. The theory of communicative action intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices.' The part of his early theory he now rejects is the assumption that modern society can be conceived as a large association 'in which the associated individuals can participate like the members of an encompassing organization.'[2] Such an assumption is no longer plausible in a highly complex, functionally differentiated society. Thus Habermas sees the role of the public sphere and that of the intellectual operating within this space in a more pragmatic light than in the 1960s when the utopian element of his theory was decidedly stronger. Whereas the early Habermas hoped for

2. Jürgen Habermas, 'Further Reflections on the Public Sphere,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge: MIT Press), 442, 443.

a radical democracy that would reconstruct both the forms and the means of political communication that had led to the decline of the bourgeois public sphere, the Habermas of the 1990s focuses on the moral and legal issues involved in the making of a democratic society. Hence, in his role as a public intellectual he is particularly concerned with questions of political culture and broader issues of historical traditions that transcend the level of conventional party politics. In the revised definition of his task, he foregrounds a moment that was already part of his early theory – political discourse is understood as a form of communication that is not exclusively defined in terms of interests.

As suggested above, Habermas holds on to the ideas of a radical democracy in which the citizens are encouraged to participate in the policy- and decision-making process. Although the state and its various administrative organizations are acknowledged as necessary media of power, they are also viewed as potential threats to democracy. In this respect Habermas stands in sharp contrast to neoconservative intellectuals in Germany, who were influenced by the teachings of Carl Schmitt after 1945 (although Schmitt was not allowed to return to his university post). Schmitt, who had been a crucial political theorist in favor of the takeover by the National Socialists in 1933, continued to have, as Habermas points out in 'Carl Schmitt in the Political Intellectual History of the Federal Republic,' a significant impact on West Germany's intellectual life through private circles and devoted followers, many of whom later ended up in important public positions. For the position of the neoconservatives, the centrality of the state remains unquestioned.

Against this interpretation of the German tradition Habermas wants to foreground the popular and democratic ele-

ments of the German past. Yet Habermas's idea of a radical democracy has to be distinguished from two competing versions of political practice; namely, the tradition of communal democracy (Rousseau) on the one hand and state Socialism on the other. Already, in *Structural Transformation,* Habermas had opted for a Kantian reading of the public sphere rather than a populist definition à la Rousseau in which rational deliberation among the citizens as a mode of reaching consensus is played down. Habermas's emphasis on solidarity does not mean a democracy of the heart. More important in the contemporary debate, however, is his opposition to the model of state Socialism, which Habermas encountered in East Germany. Unlike other members of the Left in West Germany, Habermas never showed any sympathy for the version of democratic centralism practiced in East Berlin. Its method of state and party control clearly clashed with Habermas's notion of a democratic process from below based on the deliberations of the citizens. In 1962, Habermas had criticized the lack of a vital political culture in contemporary Western democracies (using primarily American data). He noted a growing fusion of state and parliament, a process that resulted in political decisions based on compromise rather than rational debate. But although Habermas has continued to be a critical observer of parliamentary democracy, he has never suggested or argued for a fundamental change of the West German (now German) constitution. In other words, his notion of radical democracy has been grounded in the liberal tradition that he found in Western Europe and the United States. In his essays, Habermas again and again highlights the historical moment of 1945 as the crucial turning point in German history, when West Germany's political culture took in the

ideas of the European Enlightenment. This is precisely the point where he disagrees with Christa Wolf's reading of 1989 in which she emphasized the need to return to the roots of German culture both in the East and in the West. Habermas clearly does not trust an unqualified use of the concept of the German tradition as it has increasingly resurfaced in Germany after 1989.

Habermas's discomfort with the revival of Carl Schmitt and the growing influence of his work after the German reunification in 1990 is closely related to his concern about the antidemocratic elements within the German political tradition. Schmitt's critique of liberal democracy as an outdated form of decision making and his outspoken contempt for deliberative forms of politics are part of a problematic German legacy that Habermas perceives as a danger for the changing political culture of the new German Republic.[3] For Habermas, Schmitt stands close to Martin Heidegger. What they both have in common is a Catholic background – including its traditional critique of the Enlightenment and modernity in general – leading to their decision in 1933 to welcome Hitler as the leader of a new Germany. Neither Heidegger nor Schmitt ever expressed regrets about their commitment in 1933. This attitude, Habermas argues, has then resulted in a reading of German history that has become particularly relevant after 1989 in the work of historians such as Ernst Nolte.[4] It de-emphasizes the collapse of German fascism in

3. See Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), originally published in German in 1923, and Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), originally published in German in 1922.

4. See Ernst Nolte, *Das Vergehen der Vergangenheit* (Frankfurt am Main: Ullstein, 1987); *Lehrstück oder Tragödie? Beiträge zur Interpretationder Ge-*

1945 and stresses the need for a return to older political traditions. In his comparison between Theodor Maunz, the leading jurist of the Federal Republic, and Carl Schmitt, Habermas highlights the power and potential danger of Schmitt's thought in Germany: 'But of these two men only Carl Schmitt, only the one who defied the ruling political culture and dramatized himself as a defamed dissident, can make available the resources from which the re-awakened need for German continuities can be satisfied.'

After receiving his Ph.D. in philosophy Habermas began his academic career as the assistant of Theodor W. Adorno in the new Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. Adorno's influence on the early work of Habermas is hard to overlook. As much as he later moved away from the theoretical foundations of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and increasingly distanced himself from its critique of Enlightenment rationalism, he always stressed his personal loyalties to Adorno and the latter's importance in postwar Germany. Adorno offered a model of intellectual analysis in the public sphere that undoubtedly shaped Habermas's sense of his own project. Adorno, together with Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Leo Löwenthal, and Hannah Arendt, embodied the other side of the German tradition – the side that was forced into exile in 1933 and then only reluctantly readmitted in 1945. What Habermas admires in Adorno's writings is a critical appreciation of the German tradition – a deep sympathy and an unquestionable commitment without the nationalistic overtones that

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schichte des 20. Jahrhunderts (Cologne: Bölau, 1991); *Die Deutschen und ihre Vergangenheit: Erinnerung und Vergessen von der Reichsgrüdung Bismarcks bis heute* (Berlin: Propylaen, 1995).

distorted this tradition already in the late nineteenth century. His essay on the exchange of letters between Adorno and Benjamin demonstrates how close Habermas has remained to the legacy of his mentors. It is Adorno rather than Benjamin who is invoked as the intellectual guide and *Praeceptor Germaniae:* 'Adorno made a generation of assistants, one or two generations of students and an eager-to-learn public that read his essays and listened to his radio talks, aware of the silencings and marginalized potentialities, the alienated and encapsulated elements within *our own* traditions.' Hence the end of the essay returns to Habermas's major concerns: the interpretation of the German cultural tradition, its selection and emphasis, and articulates a growing discomfort with the cultural as well as political climate of the new Germany.

This passionate defense of Adorno and the political culture of the 1960s and 1970s shows Habermas in a 'conservative' position – the last defender of the Adenauer Republic, to quote Ralf Dahrendorf. This quip brings into the foreground Habermas's ambivalent attitude toward the early years of the Federal Republic. On the one hand, Adenauer achieved the integration of West Germany into the Western alliance (for Habermas clearly a moment of substantial historical progress). On the other hand, Adenauer's political system remained repressive and refused to come to terms with the German past. The turn of 1945 therefore remained incomplete. For Habermas, it was Critical Theory and the New Left as it emerged in the 1960s that completed this turn. Hence, in his essay 'What Does "Working Off the Past" Mean Today?' Habermas not only invokes Adorno's legacy but also emphasizes his dialectical method; namely, a form of immanent critique that brings to light the repressed ele-

ments of the past and thereby makes possible their critical appropriation. Habermas has consistently intervened where he observes attempts to paste over the Third Reich and restore a sense of normal continuity from Bismarck to Kohl. Because these revisionist voices have become stronger during the last decade and have also found more prominent media (among them the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*), the critique of historical revisionism has become a constant theme in Habermas's writings since the Historians' Debate in 1986.[5] Since 1989, however, these issues have penetrated German political culture to a much higher degree. The quest for a common national identity caused by the unexpected and hasty act of unification undermined the Left-liberal consensus of the intellectuals and the political class in West Germany (not to mention the disastrous results for the intelligentsia in East Germany). Now Germany's integration into the West appeared in a different light; namely, as her potential participation in global political power and a possible renewal of hegemony in Europe.[6]

Habermas's response to these tendencies has been decidedly critical. He has rejected both the claim for a new foreign policy exclusively based on principles of national self-interest and military power that would be demonstrated through international actions and economic pressure, and he has sharply criticized the potential erosion of democratic rights in the changing political structure of post-Wall Germany. The increasing violence against foreigners in the early

5. See Charles Maier, *The Unmasterable Past* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

6. On the changes in the public sphere in post-Wall Germany see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, 'Recasting the Public Sphere,' *October* 73 (summer 1995), 27–54.

1990s, the curtailment of the right of asylum guaranteed by the Basic Law of the Federal Republic, as well as the attempts of the Federal government and the states (*Länder*) to increase the power of the police vis-à-vis the citizens are prominent examples of the new climate that Habermas mentions. In this context he points to the moral ground of the legal system and especially of the constitution, which is supposed to protect the individual citizen. 'The legal order of democratic constitutional states embodies a moral content, and for the realization of that content it is not dependent solely on the goodwill of those whom it addresses.' He continues to argue that the democratic procedures as they are presumed by the German constitution depend on active citizens. To put it differently, they depend on exchange of ideas and debate in a functioning public sphere. Habermas wants to assert (and this may seem radical only against the background of a conservative German tradition) that a legitimate legal system cannot exist without moral foundations and democratic procedures.

For Habermas, radical democracy is a procedural democracy – a definition that differs from a type of representative democracy in which popular participation is limited to a few formal acts such as voting.[7] The Habermasian emphasis on procedures indicates that it is difficult to establish consensus in a modern society where its members no longer automatically share the same worldview (religion). It is apparent that Habermas is not satisfied with the procedures of party democracy (which Germany's constitution favors) and encourages free associations and *Bürgerinitiativen* as venues

7. See also Seyla Benhabib, 'Models of Public Space: Hannah Arendt, the Liberal Tradition, and Jürgen Habermas,' in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 73–98.

for critical exchange and political deliberation. In the German case, the dilemma seems to be, however, that the public sphere, in which this form of basic democracy has to be rooted, has increasingly been occupied by neoconservative ideas that are hardly compatible with the concept of a radical democracy. For these intellectuals, not 1945 but 1989 is the true turning point of German history; namely, the restoration of Germany's 'normal' position as a major political power in Europe that selects and carries out policies according to its own national interests (which are those of the state rather than those of the citizens).

For his conservative opponents and critics, Habermas's attitude toward the unification of Germany and, more broadly, German nationalism has been particularly frustrating. Not only did he resist the widespread enthusiasm for unification, but he also repeatedly took issue with the new wave of nationalism in East and West.[8] Instead, he stressed the need for a different form of patriotism at the end of the twentieth century. His call for *Verfassungspatriotismus* (constitutional patriotism) focused on the centrality of the constitution for cohesion and solidarity in a modern democratic society. In this inflection, the importance of ethnic cohesion is deliberately scorned as an aspect of nineteenth-century nationalism that should be abandoned in the age of international migration.

In his recent essays, Habermas has taken a more positive stance with respect to the historical importance of the nation-state as a way of encouraging and enforcing the modernization of European societies. Moreover, now Habermas points to the democratic impulse of the nation-state: 'The

8. See Jürgen Habermas, *The Past as Future,* trans. and ed. Max Pensky (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 33–54.

"invention of the people's nation" (H. Schulze) had a catalyzing effect on the democratization of state power. A democratic basis for the legitimation of domination would not have developed without national self-awareness.' In other words, nationalism institutes different forms of social integration and thereby creates a new and powerful model of legitimation for the state. What Habermas acknowledges in his most recent work is the element of solidarity among the members of the nation as a beneficial form of social cohesion. But he also notes the potential negative aspect of nationalism; that is, the naturalized particularism of the nation. He objects to the assumption that the historically evolved and in many cases rather arbitrary structure of the nation-state has the dignity of an end in itself to which the lives of the citizens can be sacrificed.

Habermas's more positive evaluation of nationalism remains qualified by two factors: in the German case, he insists on the failure of ethnic nationalism, which resulted, broadly speaking, in the Holocaust. More generally, Habermas argues that the model of the nation-state is no longer adequate for the global problems of the late twentieth century. Neither in terms of economic and technological developments nor in terms of mass migration and the pressure of environmental questions is the nation-state truly autonomous and thus able to offer adequate solutions. Focusing on the global nature of communication, recently accelerated still further by electronic media, Habermas suggests that we are dealing with a radically changed structure of the public sphere, which can no longer be contained within national boundaries. Yet under these conditions, the feasibility of a common democratic consciousness cannot be taken for granted. Referring to J. M. Guéhenno, Habermas raises the question whether we

have actually reached the end of democracy. Conceding that the odds are not altogether good, he nevertheless returns to the idea of radical democracy within a larger European community. The goal that Habermas envisions is clearly not the administrative unification of Brussels but the extension of Strasbourg as a counterweight to the narrow and ultimately destructive definition of national self-interest.

In these ideas and suggestions, the utopian moments of Habermas's thought come to the fore. For him the tension between ideal and reality, respectively the normative and the descriptive level of his theory, has always been a defining element – an element that has also determined his political writings. It has marked the rhetoric of his interventions even in the case of his more incidental statements. Since Habermas is quite conscious of this aspect of his thought, he has made it part of his systematic reflection. Thus theory and praxis are dialectically linked. For this reason, the essays collected in this volume return again and again to two topics: first, the legitimation and goal of philosophy – specifically, the philosophical legitimation of political procedures and decisions; and second, the issue of language and communication. Both of these topics are tied up with the search for the possibility of universals (norms, values, morality). Here it is interesting to observe how consistently Habermas attempts to link his essays with his systematic theoretical writings.

When Habermas raises the question of philosophy he does this very much in the tradition of Critical Theory; for instance, in the tradition of Horkheimer's famous 1937 essay on the distinction between conventional and critical theory or Adorno's 1962 essay on the feasibility of systematic phi-

losophy in the age of advanced capitalism.[9] Whereas the late Adorno felt that the tradition of systematic philosophy had come to an end and therefore favored the essay form as the most appropriate vehicle for creative thought, Habermas has never shared this radical critique of philosophy and, in particular, of rationalism. In certain ways he has remained closer to the early program of the Frankfurt School, although the epistemological and the political differences are impossible to overlook. For one thing, Habermas sees himself beyond a type of philosophy that his teachers still represented: the assumption that philosophy is charged with the task of *Totalitätserkenntnis,* the search for absolute truth, whether in the form of an ontology or in the mode of negative dialectics. By moving closer to the English and American tradition, Habermas also wants to move philosophy closer to the marketplace, thereby involving it in the issues of the day. He obviously feels comfortable with this streak of pragmatism that is so clearly at odds with the tradition of Critical Theory and most of all with Adorno's conception of negative dialectics. The pragmatic gesture notwithstanding, Habermas's defense of philosophy remains faithful to the concept of reason and rationality developed by the Frankfurt School. Thus for him the critique of rationalism and its consequences in the modern world (Max Weber) must be based on reason *(Vernunft),* specifically in the form of intersubjective communication and consensus. As much as Habermas's conception of language (as the ultimate ground of subjectivity) differs from that of Adorno, it retains the belief that reason has

9. Max Horkheimer, 'Traditional and Critical Theory,' in Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), 188–243; Theodor W. Adorno, 'Wozu noch Philosophie,' in Adorno, *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 10.2:459–73.

a critical potential and cannot be reduced to a mere instrumental use. Thus Habermas shows no inclination to give up on 'Occidental rationalism' and convert to cultural particularism.

This means that Habermas's understanding of legal and political issues is driven by universal claims as the ultimate horizon of theoretical reflection. Nevertheless, it is important to distinguish between abstract ideals that are seen as counterfactual and ideal situations that are already implied in everyday praxis. The 'Conversation about Questions of Political Theory' (a dialogue between him and Mikael Carleheden and Rene Gabriels) emphasizes this difference:

> For it cannot be the philosopher who – in the name of his normative theory and with the gesture of an impotent Ought – furthers a postconventional consciousness, thus sinning against a human nature that pessimistic anthropology has always led into battle against the intellectuals' dream dances. All we do is reconstruct the Ought that has immigrated into praxis itself, and we only need to observe that in positive law and the democratic constitutional state, that is, in the existing practices themselves, principles are embodied that depend on a postconventional grounding, and to that extent are tailored to the public consciousness of a liberal political culture.

According to Habermas, the tension between the actual cultural and political conditions and the implied *ought* contains the motivation for change. Pressured by his interlocutors to provide a more precise definition of the kind of 'idealization' that occurs in the ideal speech community, Habermas differentiates his own position from hermeneutic idealism as well as the positions of Apel and Peirce. The notion of an 'ideal speech situation' is treated as a strictly methodological concept. From the point of view of practical politics,